

Radical Middle Way Transcripts



**Dr. Usman Hasan on:
'Why Europe needs Islām'**

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In the name of God the most Merciful, I thank Abdul-Rehman and the Radical Middle Way team.

Why does Europe need Islām? I actually had a discussion about a theological issue with Mustafa Cerić a few years ago, and it's a pity he's not here to comment. It was about whether or not God sent any Prophets to Europe and for that it's a simple answer. For me, why Europe needs Islam is that the whole of humanity, the whole world needs Islām, because the way I was brought up with Islām as a child, is that Islam is the universal message of God to humanity. The really particular aspect of Islam was the message of the Prophet Muhammad, the final form of this message of God. And through that many people thought this was the message of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and actually forget that the Qur'an is full of the idea that Islam is this universal message that began with Adam, the first human being on Earth, and continued throughout the chain of Prophets, bringing the same divine message of God, the Oneness of God and the importance of having a sense of the sacred, of having a sense of the fear and love of God; so Noah, Abraham, Moses were in between Jacob, Joseph and Solomon. Abdul-Rehman mentioned the Muslim Jesus, who was part of that chain. Then comes the Prophet Muhammad.

Now, amongst the Muslim theologians, there is a view that after Noah and Abraham all of the Prophets of God were found in the children of Israel, and the children of Ishmael and the Prophet Muhammad. Based on a verse from the Qur'an, it's particularised – that after Abraham all of the Prophets are from his progeny. And this was the view that Mustafa Cerić expressed in discussing why no Prophets were sent to Europe. Many of our teachers – they tend to be the Sufi ones, but anyway – they say (and I strongly agree with this view) that God sent Messengers to every part of the World. *'wa laqad ba'thnā fi kul umma rasūl'*. Two examples spring to mind; one is Socrates who many of our scholars regard as a Prophet of God, divinely inspired. His perhaps most famous teaching is, *'Know thyself'* – which is a universal teaching, found in every religion. There's a famous Hadīth that says *'man 'arafa nafsahu 'arafa rubbuhu'* – *whoever knows himself knows his Lord*. Now, I come from an Ahl Al-Hadīth tradition where the scholars of hadīth actually say that this hadīth is not sound, and Imam Nawwawī confirms this. It's not actually authentic from the Prophet. But the meaning of this is in the Qur'an quite clearly: *'wa lā tukūnu k'alledthīna nasau Allah f'ansahum anfusuhum'* – *do not be like who forgot God and God made him forget himself*. So Socrates, Plato and Aristotle therefore all come from a Prophetic tradition.

Another example: I was reciting the Qur'an for inspiration on the way and I just happened to come across *Sūrat Luqmān* – Luqmān the great wise man, and as scholars have said, including Abdulla Yusuf Ali who has also translated the Qur'an, actually identified Luqmān with Aesop; if they're not the same person then they're very similar – their traditions of wisdom are very similar. And it's very interesting that you find in Aesop's fables two or three stories that are found in the Qur'an and the Hadīth. One of Aesop's morals is that *'A hypocrite deceives nobody but himself'* and that is actually a Qur'ānic teaching. Another thing that the Prophet said in the Hadīth Nawwawī was also one of the earliest teachings that people have come across – the ancient ones – is that *'If you feel no shame, do as you wish'* – this is a moral in Aesop's fables. If Aesop wasn't a Prophet, he certainly had access to ancient wisdom. That puts a whole different complexion on the way we view religion and Islām.

Just to say, by the way, that you find in the works of Ibn Taymiyyah and Al-Ghazālī, there is a mismatch between the Prophets and the philosophers. Those traditional scholars tend to attack the philosophers, and hold the Prophets of God against the philosophers. I actually incline strongly towards Seyid Huseyn Nasr's view, which says it is a tradition of Prophetic philosophy. Within Islām and within other traditions and that's a universal point. The point is, what is Islām? In Sūrat Al-Baqarah, which we are trained in and grounded in from the very beginning, the great Sūrah's at the beginning, constantly reiterate this message: Islām is not this specific message only, it's a universal message between God and human beings. It started with Adam and continues through all of these great Prophets and continues until the Day of Judgement. *'Do you seek a way of life of other than submission to God, when everything in the Heavens and the Earth submits to him willingly or unwillingly?'* In Sūrat Al-Baqarah it says *'Do you believe that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Moses and Jesus were all Jewish or Christian?'* No, what the Qur'an is saying is that they're all Muslim submitters to God. And this is how Muslims view all of the Prophets, and this message of God to humanity. That message is one that Muslims particularly need to articulate in the West, Europe. Because for too many people in the West, Muslims included, Islām is seen as something Eastern.

We have a lot of talk about *'Islām in the West, Islām versus the West'* – this kind of non-sensical term. I would like to quote something Abdul-Hakim Jackson said in Wales last year. He asked a simple question: 'What's the opposite of the West? The answer is the East, and I know that well, I'm an astronomer. The opposite of the West is not Islām.' This notion of Islām Vs. The West is predicated as a basic misunderstanding. We should be talking about Islām in the West. And I believe that this is what Muslims will be talking about also. Islām has been in the West for a long time. Abdul-Rehman alluded to this; in Andalusia the great example of tolerance and working together; the Ottoman Empire for five centuries; Sicily for several centuries. So Islām has been in Europe for a long time. The renaissance quite clearly has strong links and roots to Islām – Avicenna, Averroes, Ibn Nafis, Bayrūnī, all of these great Muslim scientists and philosophers contributed to the Renaissance, to Europe, to Christen them in Western Europe.

There is a great exhibition touring at the moment called a thousand and one inventions which looks at this immense legacy and history of Muslim contributions to Europe. This is something that Muslims are, and should be, very proud of, that all of our technology is rather breathtaking – the current state of our technology is either driven by the West or Japan don't forget – is breathtaking, and for me, a sign of God. Things like Power point, satellite TV, mobile phones, a satellite, a space shuttle, the electromagnetic waves that are floating around everywhere. You can't see them but they're responsible for this age of communication. For me, especially as a physicist, these are the great signs of God and the way God has created creation. Certainly it was a thousand years of Muslim science that contributed to that. Now it doesn't mean that we claim ownership, that all of this is ours – clearly not. All of this has been a joint effort – the way science and technology always has been. But I think we should be very proud of the legacy there and see it as a joint effort, going forward again; it is partnership and working together: Islām in the West.

I'll come to a couple of more points related to this: that perhaps Europe can learn from the Muslims and vice versa. Now related to this issue of East and the West,

there is a verse in the Qur'ān that describes the light of God Islam is that faith, it's awareness of God.

[The adthān sounds]

That was very timely – the fact that Muslims still interrupt their day for the five daily prayers, for the remembrance of Allah, the remembrance of God and glorification of God. These are, I think, of the gifts that Muslims still have to give to Europe and the West.

In the Chapter of Light, there is this symbolism of the Olive and the Olive tree, and it says that this olive tree from where the oil and olives come from is a reminder of God's light and the human heart, which is that the olive oil almost catches fire without the fire touching it. That's the faith in the human heart, ready to be kindled with the awe and fear and faith in God. That's one of the most beautiful parables and allegories in the Qur'ān. It says, *'This olive tree is made neither of the East or the West'* and again this is the Muslim view and Islām is universal. Or you could say it's both the East and the West, but it is the harmony. But Prince Charles who I think is a great mystic, said something about this recently when he visited the birth place of Mawlāna Jalāl Al-dīn Rūmi. He said, 'this is a good place to balance the East and West in ourselves.' You need some balance especially if you're going to be a whirling dervish, spinning around for hours and hours. Do what Prince Charles said, right? it's about reconciling East and West in ourselves, which reminds me of another important point Prince Charles made about ten or twelve years ago. He said, 'Europe and the Westerners need to learn a sense of the Sacred from the Muslims.' So this is something very strong that the Muslims still have, especially when you read writings by Lings and Seyyid Huseyn Nasr and others, you'll see how important the sense of the sacred is. Because everything in creation is a sign of God, everything around us – the Qur'ān is full of this. One of the great miracles of the Qur'an – it's not a God of the gaps by the way, which is what Dawkin and others say. The Qur'an is certainly not talking about the God of the gaps, taking away the God that we are familiar with; the real *ayat Allah*, the sun and the moon and the stars, the trees and the oceans, the mountains; everything around us we see are signs of God, pointing to God. Muslims have a deep sense of the sense of the sacred by that which we are surrounded by God's signs and God's word, and God's actions.

Now, Prince Charles said that we need to learn a sense of sacred in the West. I quoted this to Fleming [inaudible] a couple of years ago, when Fleming, the Danish cartoon editor addressed a group of young Muslims. I said to him, isn't it time that Europe re-learned a sense of the sacred which is one of the problems we have in Europe and the cartoons. He gave an answer about the sacred and the secular. Later on, there was a Christian mayor there from the United States who said that my question had gone right over the editor's head. Those were his words. Because the sense of the sacred, I do believe, is one of the things that is lacking in the modern world and certainly in Europe.

We have immensely developed systems of law, which Muslims value and which is why Muslims live here in the West. But there is one slight problem, and that is people of loyalty turned away from religion and away from God. And there is a good reason for why Europe went secular with all these wars. But you don't throw the baby out of the bath water, especially when it's no ordinary baby – it's God Almighty, the One

and Only God. So that sense of the sacred, having an appreciation of the importance of faith in public and private life is extremely important. One book I recommend is by the late Lord Hailsham is called 'Values: Collapse and Cure' - it's a beautiful book and it's printed in his handwriting. He wrote this book in his eighties and he wrote an introduction at the time of the great depression. He sank into depression because he realised that British intelligentsia had given up values that he had held to be sacred from a young age. Values like truth and falsehood, beauty, right and wrong – simple values like that. He quite rightly castigates, logical positivism, the idea that everything is arbitrary and can't prove anything, unless you can put it under a microscope or subjected to experiments and you can't subject values like good and evil, beauty and truth and falsehood to experiment.

So for many people all of these are categories that come out of our minds, our neurons, our psycho-linguistic categories which have no real meanings in themselves, but are just used as labels: beauty and ugliness, truth and falsehood. So these very basic values, which for the Muslims, come from Allah; Allah is *jamīl* – God is beautiful and loves beauty. He is mercy, he is the merciful. He is the source of all of these values.

That grounding in faith, I think is an important contribution Muslims have to debate here in the West.

Finally, just a couple of points.

We're talking about Islām going forward, and Islām and Europe is very much a partnership. What kind of Islām, what form of Islām will that take?

I should really hurry because I see the Shaykh is here...because in Fiqh there is a principle of not using dust when you have water.

So, what form will it take?

There are a couple of issues: Islām and democracy. People often ask this question, which to me seems ridiculous, *is Islām compatible with democracy?* For a Muslim it's the other way round, number one. It's not even apples and oranges – we're comparing two completely different things. One is the eternal message of God to humanity; the other is a particularly efficient way of political organisation or social organisation etc. So the issue is a little bit strange but certainly there's no problem in democracy – a particular way of organising one's political system, and obviously it works very well and effectively, in Europe. You get these young extremists and radicals who speak and say that democracy is *harām* or *kufṛ*, is clearly nonsense. The key point I would like to make is about democracy.

It's not really the democratic election, the election itself that is democracy. Many people reduce democracy to just elections. At the City Circle last week we had a session on Pakistan, and it became apparent during the discussion that the biggest problem Pakistan has, is that it's stuck in a medieval feudalism. You have 100 million people, the majority of the population or more, living as servants living under the strangle-hold of the land owners. To be obsessed with elections in next month's ballot box is slightly nonsensical in those circumstances. And really the strength of democratic societies is that Islāmic principle, *consultation* – *shūrah*. It says that

human beings should decide everything by mutual consultation. The strength of democratic societies is that there is mutual consultation at every level, not just at the ballot box once every four years. It's your local school, local college, local council, industry. When you want to introduce something new in the transport system, the electricity system, mobile phone, whatever, you have consultation, white papers – they consult each other. This is what is so great about Britain and why we work so well. For Muslims this is a Qur'ānic principle, which Muslims had for centuries. That is why the Caliphate and sultanate were very powerful and very just and very merciful. Finally, just a couple of words on secularism, which is a huge issue.

We have to have this debate, but Ibn Khaldūn had a lot to offer here. There is a famous hadīth of the Prophet discussing cross-pollination. In short the people in Medina were cross pollinating date trees and the Prophet didn't like it, it seemed to go into nature. He advised against it. But then yield went down and he went back to the Prophet and told him this. The Prophet said, in a narration that is sound, '*You know your worldly matters best*'. Ibn Khaldūn says that the Prophet didn't need to teach the details of agriculture, trade and taxation, but he gives the principles – the universal principles – of mercy, harmony etc. the rest is left to the people. Now, the word secular means 'world' – it's from the word, '*dunyā*' in Arabic. So when the Prophet says, you know your worldly matters best, that's an argument for Islāmic secularism. Some people don't like that term but it's there in the hadīth. The Prophet is saying. On most matters of the modern state, which most of the fundamentalists don't understand, such as government taxation, running industries, running life, these are all matters of *dunyā*.

I apologise for taking up so much of your time. Those are some of the thoughts that enter my mind. There are deep theological issues about the nature of God and human beings and the nature of Islam as a universal message to humanity, which enabled it to have a conversation with all religions.

We look forward to what Dr. Kamal and Mufti Mustafa Ceric have to say.

About Dr Usama Hasan

Dr. Usama Hasan is a lecturer in science, engineering and astronomy at Middlesex University and at the Cambridge Muslim College. He has ijaza in Qur'an & Hadith, and holds degrees in Physics and Artificial Intelligence from the universities of Cambridge and London. He has served as a part-time imam at Tawhid Mosque in London for over 20 years. After graduating, Usama worked for five years in industry before returning to academia. He is a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, and was formerly Planetarium Lecturer at the Royal Observatory Greenwich. He has translated a number of texts on Islam from Arabic and Urdu into English, including "The Prophet's Prayer Described," "The Character of the People of the Qur'an," "Hajj - The Journey of Love," and his latest publication, "Way of the Prophet" (Islamic Foundation, 2009). He is a regular commentator on national media, including the Guardian's Comment Is Free. Usama served as Director of the City Circle, 2008-9.

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